

Sunday, September 13th, 2020

15th Sunday After Pentecost

Call to Worship

One: The Blessing of God,

People: Who is in this place and every place;

One: the blessing of Jesus,

People: who is among us, often unrecognized;

One: the blessing of the Holy Spirit,

People: encouraging us to welcome and to feel at home;

One: be with you all.

People: As we share this place and time, may our life in community reflect the light of Christ's life, which shines into the world.

Prayer of Adoration

O God, when we pray to center ourselves on the essentials of the faith, we often come up short, our spirits flagging, our trust waning, our lives out of focus. We admit bringing to worship today hesitations, reluctance and doubt. Come among us, we pray, with conquering love; expose us to the light of truth. Draw us out by your Spirit so we might serve you through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hymn 338 Let all things now living

Prayer of Confession

God of love, we confess that we try your patience with our inconsistencies. We recount for those closest to us the number of times they have offended us, but forget the endless times you have forgiven us for a wide range of wrongs. We

want justice for our neighbors' wrongs, but mercy for our own. God of mercy, forgive such unevenness in us. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

L: Friends, hear the Good News! God pardons our guilt and surrounds us with constant love.

P: **God pardons our guilt and surrounds us with tender affection.**

L: Friends, believe the Good News!

P: **In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.**

Mission Capsule – New Beginnings and Evangelism Coaches

The Apostle Paul, in his pursuit of sharing the gospel message, says that in doing so he is “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Philippians 3:13). Looking ahead is not always an easy thing to do, especially in the rapidly changing environment that we live in today. For congregations, it can be a struggle to know how to continue to reach out to their communities and share the gospel in meaningful ways. The PCC has developed a network of coaches to help congregations and ministers to discover where God is calling them. Through programs like New Beginnings and the Evangelism Network, congregations can be connected with a coach to guide them into an exciting new era of ministry. Contact Canadian Ministries canadianministries@presbyterian.ca to learn more about the New Beginnings program and the Evangelism Network.

Hymn 530 I come with joy

Readings:

Exodus 14: 19-31 God parts the sea for the Hebrews

Psalms 114 Tremble, O earth

Romans 14: 1-12 Owe no one anything but love

Matthew 18: 21-35 How many times must I forgive?

Hymn 685 How firm a foundation

Sermon: "Forgiveness Beyond Bookkeeping!"

It will be twenty years ago this October that a man entered an Amish school in West Nickle Mines, Pennsylvania, and murdered a number of Amish girls. Within hours of that tragedy, the Amish in that community offered forgiveness to the family of the killer, since the police had shot the man shortly after the murders.

At the funeral for the murderer, over half the people present were from the Amish community. Their forgiveness went beyond simple words, for they set up a fund for the children of the man who did the killing.

The Amish model for forgiveness is the suffering Jesus carrying his cross without any complaint and extending forgiveness to those who will take his life.

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," he said.

Forgiveness is not easy. Today's gospel is the continuation from last week's story, in which Jesus directs his disciples to "go to a fellow believer who has hurt you and become reconciled."

At that point Peter must have realized that Jesus was asking a lot, for Peter said to Jesus,

"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Jesus quickly responds,

"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy- seven times."

Perhaps Peter knew the book of Amos, and in particular the part where God speaking through Amos says:

For three transgressions and for four, I will not revoke punishment."

Maybe Peter doubled the three to six and added one for good measure to come to seven. In any case, Jesus, as he so often does, tells a story to make the point:

There was a King who had lots of money and lived in a palace, while his servants lived in huts. The king drives around in a gold carriage while the servants have to walk. For supper the king eats caviar, lobster and the best of steaks while the servants are lucky to have a crust of bread and a sausage.

Yet the king seems quite willing to loan some of his wealth to his servants. He does this no doubt with interest. One day the king is settling his accounts with the servants who have borrowed money from him. The servants have received notice that they are to come to the palace on a certain day. When the day arrives there is a long line of servants on the steps leading up to the palace doors.

The first servant enters and stands before the king, who is seated on his throne. There beside him on a table is a ledger. Standing by the table there is an aide to the king. The aide hands the ledger to the king, who turns the pages until he comes to the name of the servant standing before him.

The king looks up at the servant and says, "It says here you owe me a lot of money. In fact you owe me ten thousand talents. The slave nods in agreement. I want my money says the King. There is a moment's silence, and then the servant indicates he can't pay.

The king beckons his aide over and they speak on the q.t. They are discussing selling the servant and his family to try and recoup some of their losses. The auctioneer is called and now the servant is down on his knees pleading,

"Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."

The king feels sorry for the servant, so much so that he lets him go, cancelling the debt. The servant stands up and the king takes that page out of the ledger and rips it up. Go in peace, says the king, you are released from your debt.

Try to imagine the joy, the excitement, the utter astonishment of that servant as he leaves the palace. His feet probably never touch the steps as he dances his way down the flight of stairs. Talk about your deeply moving experience.

Then, near the bottom of the steps the man sees another servant who owes him money, a hundred denarii, or about four months 'wages. He grabs that slave by the throat and says,

“Pay what you owe.”

Notice what this servant does. He gets down on his knees and begs, just like the first servant did before the king. Yet this forgiven servant calls for the police and has the servant who owes him put in prison.

The other servants on the steps see and hear all this and they are not amused. One gets the impression in fact that they know what happened inside the palace. How could they know so quickly since the text says, **“As he went out...”**

News travels fast. We know that ourselves. Have you not experienced this? You are at a meeting with a small number of people making an important decision. You leave the meeting and head home, or go to Tim Horton's for a coffee, or wherever, and there you hear about the decision that was made at the meeting. News travels fast!

Now these servants on the steps decide to turn their fellow servant in. They march into the palace and tell the king what they have just witnessed outside on the steps.

The king is shocked and orders that slave back into his presence. The king says to the servant, “Weren't you here a few minutes ago?” “Yes sir.” “And as I recall I opened the ledger where it said you owed me ten thousand talents. Is that right?” “Yes sir!”

“You begged for patience, for more time and I tore the page out of the ledger and wiped out your debt. Now what is this I hear that you did at the

bottom of the stairs? Did you really seize another servant who owed you a little money, and when he couldn't pay you had him put in prison?" " Ah, yes sir!"

"Well, says the king, I have news for you. That prison cell you sent your fellow servant to has room for more. Now I am sending you to that prison until you pay me all you owe me. Ten thousand talents, or three and one half billion dollars.

But no one in that time and place could own three and one half billion dollars. The entire revenue for the whole Roman Empire was under a million dollars and it paid for all Roman expenditures with some left over.

The amount of time required to pay this debt would be more than two hundred thousand years. Notice, however, that the king forgives the servant's debt only to take it back a short time later.

Is that how we understand forgiveness? Isn't it true that if you forgive someone it's then over. You don't say to someone at nine o'clock in the morning, I forgive you, and then come to that person after lunch and say, I have been thinking it over and I really do not want to forgive you.

This parable is the story of a servant who was offered the forgiveness of an enormous sum of money, and did not receive it. He simply didn't let himself off the hook.

What happened at the bottom of the stairs could not have happened if he had really received forgiveness, because it would have been impossible for him to grab hold of another servant and demand money, if he was truly forgiven.

A friend borrows a few hundred dollars from you on Saturday and says, I'll pay you back tomorrow at church. On Sunday morning you check your lotto 649 ticket from last night and are astonished, for you hit the jackpot. Five million dollars. You may go to church, but I'm sure you will not be looking for that money from your friend.

So why does the servant not receive the gracious forgiveness was offered to him? Could it be that he simply couldn't bring himself to accept that gift?

Don't you and I sometimes have difficulty accepting gifts? Have you ever experienced receiving a gift for your birthday or some special occasion and you say to the one giving you the gift, "Oh, you shouldn't have." If one should not have done it, then it wouldn't be a gift. It would have been payment for services rendered.

The servant summoned to the king could have been one of us. "Your name, my name, it says here in the book you owe me a lot of money," says the king. "You owe me billions and billions." And we must answer, "that is correct. I am in such debt that even two hundred thousand years of work would not repay the debt.

The king, however, takes our names and rips them out of the book and says to us, **"Your debt is forgiven, go in peace."**

This story, by its contrast between the colossal and unpayable debt which the servant owed the king, and the insignificant sum which the fellow servant owed him, compels us to remember that any wrong which has been done to us is as nothing to the wrong which we have done to God. Amen.

Prayers

God of hope and light hear us as we pray for those who face lives filled with darkness: those who suffer in body, mind, and spirit; those bent under the burden of sorrow; those who cannot see the way ahead. We pray for those who walk with others in dark times and places; for those who comfort the grieving, who work for healing and new possibilities.

We pray, O God, for those who are suffering abuse, violence, or injustice at the hands of powerful forces, and for those who have been betrayed by people entrusted with their care.

Encourage, O God, all who work for freedom, truth and reconciliation in this world. God of peace, we pray for all who work for peace, leaders and those who make decisions with far reaching ramifications.

Hear our prayers, O God, for those who teach and those who learn, especially in these days in Covid -19. Guide all students and teachers in new ways of learning and keep them safe and healthy.

Now, O God, by the power of your Spirit, help us, your servants, as we try to live out your calling, lest in doubt we falter by poor judgement, express less than we believe, and live less than we know. In the name of Christ, who taught us to pray together, we say....the Lord's Prayer

Hymn 654 O God of Bethel

Commissioning/Benediction

Let us go now in the full confidence of God's loving presence, and in the peace that provides the depth of the inner life. It is through God our creator that we live, by Christ our friend that we are redeemed, and by the Holy Spirit that we are kept. Amen.